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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there is converging evidence for the pedagogical value of planning, repeating, and recycling activities in the language classroom. The paper is divided into three parts. Part one reviews field research done on this topic in Britain and finds some support for the proposition that planning fosters more complex language use and greater fluency and accuracy. Part two looks at the author's own work on repetition of reading and speaking activities in second language instruction, and finds that it is effective in promoting greater language fluency and larger active vocabularies. Giving students a chance to repeat an activity gives them more chances to succeed and excel. Part three argues that recycling of well-planned (teacher and student) activities is a good thing for a finite set of class task types that can be adjusted to various levels and language points--and here it is important to distinguish between doing the exact activity twice, and doing a similar activity repeatedly. It is concluded that adapted research should guide classroom practice. (Contains 32 references.) (KFT)

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Slow down!
The Importance of Repetition, Planning, and Recycling in Language Teaching
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Teachers get nervous. We don't want to waste our students' time, so we often toss them into activities unprepared. We also have a morbid fear of being boring, so we try to use as many new activities as we can. Those are laudable behaviors. Students certainly do not want their time wasted and they certainly do need variety. This presentation, argues, however, that there is converging evidence for the value of both doing some planning before tasks and repeating or recycling activities. The presentation will be divided into three parts. The first part will focus on work done in the UK on student planning before tasks and will draw some conclusions for practice. The second part will look at some of my work on repetition in reading, as well as some work done with repetition in speaking activities. The third part will argue for recycling, for a finite set of task types that can be adjusted to various levels and language points.

Planning: Does Planning Work?

Preliminary work on planning and language acquisition was done by Crookes (1989), who found that giving students ten minutes to plan a monologue resulted in significantly more complex language, as measured by words per utterance and number of subordinate clauses, than that of the group that did no planning. The planned condition also produced a significantly greater variety of words.

Skehan and Foster (1997) looked at three kinds of tasks, two planning conditions, and two post-task conditions. Their three task types were a personal information exchange task, a narrative task, and a decision task. The personal information exchange asked college students to tell their partners what surprised them about living in the U.K. The narrative was a cartoon description task. The decision was based on giving advice as in a newspaper advice column. The two planning conditions were "no planning" and "ten minutes to plan." The final condition was knowledge of post-task (plus and minus knowledge; those in the plus-knowledge post-task condition were told they would have to repeat the task in front of the class). Dependent variables were fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Planning was found to increase fluency, accuracy (for the personal and narrative tasks) and complexity (for the personal and decision tasks). The clearest results were for fluency. Knowledge that there would be a post-task largely didn't interfere with fluency or complexity, but neither did it unambiguously help accuracy.

Task type did make a difference. Planning was very effective in increasing the complexity of language in the decision task. In the narrative and personal exchange tasks, planning was very effective in increasing accuracy. There's clearly a trade-off between accuracy and complexity. As the planning time pushed students to more complex language, their accuracy did not, perhaps could not, increase.

Planning: What kind of planning is useful?

Skehan and Foster (1997) was a follow-up on Foster and Skehan's work of 1996, which studied the effects of two forms of planning, one with guidance and one without *versus* no planning. Here again, task type did make a difference, with effects of planning greater on narrative tasks and decision-making tasks. The differences between the guided and non-guided planning groups were seldom clear, with a neat and significant

progression of guided planning producing better results than unguided planning than no planning happening only for measurements of complexity.

Foster and Skehan (1999) addressed the source of planning. Intermediate-level college students engaged in a “balloon debate.” They were given roles and told they were all in a balloon that was losing altitude; they had to decide who would survive by throwing one or more other passengers overboard. (The roles were actor, politician, and teacher). The basic conditions were first focus of planning (language and content) and second source of planning (teacher or group). There were also control no-planning and solo planning conditions. In Condition 1, the group was taught modals and conditionals by the teacher. In Condition 2, they worked as a group without the teacher and wrote ideas and checked the language for accuracy. After this was done in each case, they were given the problem. In Condition 3, the teacher led a planning session about the content of the task. In Condition 4, the group did the planning. Condition 5 was the solo planning condition, which took ten minutes. Condition 6 was the no-planning condition.

Both teacher-fronted conditions produced a balanced performance: they had the highest levels of accuracy, along with reasonable complexity and fluency. The solitary planning condition also did well, producing complex and fluent language in very long turns. Group planning did not fare well; the language of the members of these groups was less fluent, less accurate and not very complex.

The results for focus of planning did not reach significance except in two cases. First, the teacher-fronted condition was more accurate than the group-based condition. Second, the teacher-fronted condition that was focused on language produced the most interactive discourse (that with the shortest turn length).

Planning: How much is useful?

Mehnert (1998) looked at the effects of different lengths of planning: one, five and ten minutes. The tasks were to leave messages on answering machines. The instruction task asked students to give directions to their home and the exposition task asked students to leave an apology. The main result replicated findings that planning helps fluency, complexity, and accuracy. However, the question of just how much planning is necessary is not always clear. One minute of planning, for example, seemed to lead to improved performance on fluency, lexical density, and accuracy measures, compared to no planning. Giving students five minutes of planning time seemed to lead to increased fluency and lexical density scores. Ten minutes of planning led to improvement over five minutes of planning in fluency, lexical density, and complexity. Accuracy, in other words, improved with just one minute of planning and didn't get better after that. Complexity did not increase until planning time was increased to ten minutes. Of course, producing more complex language is likely to stretch the learner's resources and lead to some errors.

Planning: What do students do?

What do students do when planning? Ortega (1999) found that, for a retelling task, most of them rehearsed, in one form or another. Specifically, they sorted out essential from inessential, known from unknown. They identified what they didn't know

and they identified the potential trouble spots. They tended to work on main ideas or organization before details. When rehearsing, they went from more to less support and then practiced the story in different ways.

Planning: Conclusions

Communicative Language Teaching has had a history of believing that if you put students together in pairs and let them talk, magic will happen. Sometimes indeed it does. However, I think that the research on planning should give us pause. It should make us think a little more carefully about our goals for our activities. Do we want to foster complex language, fluency or accuracy? All of the above? Research suggests this might not be possible.

Could more planning help break through the barrier of fossilization by fostering more complex language, by allowing students to stretch their linguistic resources?

We are beginning to see that not all plans are equal. We need to start experimenting in the classroom with various techniques for preparing students, including those appealing to the different senses and to different styles.

Repetition

The Case of Reading: Repeated Reading

The study of repetition in reading began with the work on “repeated reading” by Samuels (1979). Working with elementary school students, Samuels claimed that a series of repeated readings of short passages would lead to reading improvement. Samuels was concerned primarily with increasing reading speed but along with improvement in reading speed came increased word recognition skills. Critics may wonder if repetition might not lead inevitably to boredom, but Samuels claimed that because the passages were meaningful, and because the improvement provided a sense of accomplishment, students reported no boredom with the technique.

Taguchi (1997) used Samuels’ original method of repeated readings of short passages to increase oral and silent reading rates of beginning Japanese college students. Taguchi argued that repeated reading may be an effective way to increase word recognition skills and thus may lead to more fluent reading.

Andrianantenaina (1993) studied third and fourth year American university students learning German as a foreign language. Multiple rereadings led to significantly improved recall, grammaticality judgement, and vocabulary recognition scores.

The Case of Reading: Study Strategies and Skills

Research on repetition has taken another form in the Study Skills/Strategies field. Anderson's (1980) often cited review of study strategies, for example, showed that rereading was generally as effective as either note-taking or underlining in increasing comprehension of text.

Rereading facilitates recall (Barnett and Seefeldt, 1989). Barnett and Seefeldt studied students reading a law text and found that even the instruction that the passage could be reread facilitated recall. It facilitated recall even when students were actually stopped after one reading. This may be explained by lowered anxiety. The results were

not completely clear, however. Only the higher ability (measured by ACT scores) students benefited from rereading when tested on a transfer task of the principles found in the reading.

Haenggi and Perfetti (1992) found that rereading a target text on decision-making was as effective as either rewriting notes or rereading notes. This was true for both explicit and text-implicit information. However, they also found that reading ability and prior knowledge facilitated comprehension more than any study method did.

Rereading has also been found more effective than other commonly taught study strategies. Rereading was just as effective as, and sometimes more effective than, the use of explicitly taught strategies such as annotation and concept maps in learning the information contained in a passage from a sociology textbook (Nist et al., 1996) and rereading was just as effective a comprehension tool as underlining when reading a business passage (Marxen, 1996).

How many times should something be reread? It seems to depend on what needs to be remembered. Amlund and her colleagues (1986) found students who read a history text twice remembered more information in free recalls than subjects who read the text once or three times. The subjects who read the text three times remembered a significantly greater proportion of details than main ideas.

When should the students reread? Krug and his colleagues (1990) claim representations of the text should be cleared from working memory for rereading to be effective. Immediate rereading may cause readers to skim over the text, feeling that they understand it when they really do not. In this study, recall of details was significantly greater when rereading a passage after one week than after rereading the passage immediately.

The Case of Reading: Prereading versus Rereading

Brown (1997) showed, in a study of different types of intertextual prereading activities, that the simple task of rereading, the control condition in the study, was as effective as either reading a connected text or doing a writing activity designed to activate students' schemata.

Brown (in preparation) tested whether rereading a text led to comprehension equivalent to that fostered by reading a summary of that text and then the text itself. Comprehension was measured by recall of main ideas. A summary was chosen as one of the conditions because comparable prereading has been found to be very effective. For example, Chen and Graves (1995) found that reading a "preview," a summary that introduced characters and told the story up to its climax, was more effective than providing background knowledge or no prereading at all. A combination of preview and background knowledge was as effective as the preview alone, but since the combination took more time to prepare and to teach, its efficiency was questioned.

The subjects were seventy-six first-year Japanese women college students studying "Cross Cultural Studies" at a two-year women's college in northeastern Japan, all enrolled in two sections of Reading I, a required class. The experiment took place during normal class hours. Two target texts were selected for their appeal to students majoring in cross-cultural issues. Both texts were adapted from a special issue of *Time* focusing on multi-culturalism. One (Smolowe 1993) discussed the rise in the number of cross-cultural marriages in the United States and the other (Iyer 1993) discussed

globalization and how countries and cultures are becoming in some way less distinct. Both readings were rewritten to be more easily understood by false beginner/lower intermediate students.

Group 1 (n=38) read the first article, on cross-cultural intermarriage, preceded by a summary. Group 2 (n= 38) read the article twice. The conditions were reversed for the second reading, on globalization.

Immediate written recalls were collected and analyzed for the presence of main ideas. The students were simply instructed to write, in Japanese, as much as they could remember. They were given as much time as needed. Each idea was awarded one point. Since the two readings contained different numbers of main ideas, scores were analyzed as percentages of total ideas in each reading. Scores for each treatment were analyzed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc Tukey's B analysis.

No significant differences among the means ($F= 10.43$, $p=.000$) were found. Indeed, the mean scores of three of the four groups were virtually identical, with students recalling 16-17% of ideas. The mean score for the fourth group, Reading 1 in the Rereading condition, was ten percentage points higher, with 26% of ideas recalled, and a post-hoc Tukey's B comparison found that indeed this mean was significantly different from all others. That is, rereading led to equal or better comprehension than prereading, measured by recall of ideas.

Why should rereading work? From the standpoint of Just and Carpenter's capacity theory of reading comprehension, rereading may help students with limited working memories to improve their processing efficiency and thereby to go beyond syntactic processing to make use of non-syntactic information like context and prior knowledge. (Just and Carpenter 1992). In a review article, Perfetti (1997) sees working memory as one of the main factors related to individual differences in comprehension.

Of course, we may not be seeing everything that was involved. These students, who were in the second half of their year-long reading class, may have developed and internalized their own prereading strategies, automatically reading strategically. It may also be that some students, consciously or unconsciously, may have memorized some facts in the text through rereading. A previous emphasis on memorization in these students' literacy education may have given an advantage to the rereading condition. Throughout high school, Japanese students are asked to memorize large quantities of material; they become quite adept at the task of memorization, doing it quickly, efficiently, and routinely (Rohlen 1983; Rohlen & LeTendre, 1996). It may simply be that the chance to read something twice lowered the level of anxiety and this facilitated comprehension, as Barnett and Seefeldt proposed. Lynch (1996) makes a similar point about a study of listening comprehension in which half of the subjects heard a dictation once and the other half heard it twice. Repetition alone seemed to lead to higher scores.

Repetition: Speaking Activities

Bygate (1996) reported on a study of one learner immediately retelling the story from a Tom and Jerry cartoon after viewing it on two occasions, three days apart. The student did not know what she would be asked to do on either occasion. Bygate found that the student improved in the range of language used, the accuracy of the language, and in fluency. There was a decrease in the number of errors, though a very small one.

Among verbs, there was an increase in the number of simple past forms; that is, the student used more inflections and fewer stem forms. The use of the regular past tense greatly increased. In the first retelling, the student tended to use “was;” lexical verbs increased the second time (“she escape and run up the wall and there was a board” *versus* “the mouse er run up to a ca . . . to a cupboard”). Language was generally more complex; subordinate clauses increased. The student used a wider range of vocabulary, including a greater variety of transitional phrases such as “then,” “so” and “because.” There was also a slight increase in the number of adverbs and adjectives as the speaker made more evaluations of the material in the second retelling (zero evaluations in the first retelling *versus* five evaluations in the second). Though Bygate admits the measurement of this can be subjective, he also claims the number of “inappropriate or imprecise expressions” was cut (“a little film” *versus* “a cartoon”). Finally, on-line self-correction rose in the second telling.

Gass and her colleagues (1999) report on a speaking task done by students of Spanish at an American university. There were two experimental groups. One group watched and described the same Mr. Bean video three times, then watched and described another, while the second group watched and described four different videos. Both experimental groups and the control group saw the same first and fourth videos. While both experimental groups improved overall, based on a holistic judgment of their language, the “same content” group improved more than the “different content” group (though the difference was not statistically significant). The experimental groups also increased their use of words not on a list of the two hundred most frequent.

Plough and Gass (1993) sound a note of caution, pointing out that pairs that are doing a task they have done before may give it less attention; their level of negotiation of meaning may be minimal.

The research says to me that we may have placed too great a burden on ourselves as teachers by trying to come up with sparkling new activities for each class. There may be a sense in which, though we’re clearly not harming the students, we may not be giving them chances to succeed.

Recycling

The last area I want to address is recycling. Here, I’m making a distinction between doing the same thing twice and doing a similar activity repeatedly. This is not a subject that has been addressed much in the literature, but a theoretical argument might built from any number of directions. From a behaviorist point of point, recycling aids over-learning. From a connectionist point of view, recycling helps strengthen connections. I think the strongest argument for recycling, as opposed to repetition, comes from cognitive psychology and the concept of restructuring.

Experts have available to them abstract structures that are not available to novices. These structures are not simple accumulations of experience, but they are reformulations, representational changes. The pedagogical implications of this, conclude McLaughlin and Heredia, is while repetition is good because it leads to automatization, ideally what is acquired is a “plan.” As they say, “Training should involve the frequent use of a particular sentence structure in varied lexical settings, not the frequent use of

particular sentences” (McLaughlin and Heredia, 1996). I believe recycling also leads to improvement in metacognition, as students are able to see the same task from different angles, but this is speculative at this point.

One recent study does look at recycling. In this study, Lynch and Maclean (2000) look at an activity “where the basic communication goal remains the same, but with variations of content and emphasis” (p. 227). “Poster carousel” is a technique for English for Medical Purposes courses in which students work in pairs to develop a poster presentation of an academic article. Once the poster is completed, one member of the pair visits other posters while the second member of the pair stays home and explains their poster by answering questions (not by giving a presentation). Students doing the explaining thus answers many similar questions, but, because partners change (at three minute intervals), each performance of the task is different.

Lynch and Maclean tape-recorded fourteen people doing the activity and present results from two of them, the least and most advanced of the students (according to test scores). They also gave the students a questionnaire to see their reactions to the activity. About half the students overall were aware of making changes to their language as they changed partners. The best student, in fact, said she consciously tried to use different expressions she had learned in class.

Both students whose work is presented improved during the activity. The least advanced student, for example, was able to change her ration of correct to incorrect usage of subject-verb order from 3/6 to 8/2. She was fluent producing words in the last rounds that she searched for in the first. The language of the most advanced student became more precise and more complex. She was able to refine her explanation of a statistical concept over time, first expanding it to make it clearer and then contracting it to make it more precise. Here’s a good example of some language she produced:

Visit1: “It is a method to find out how, how much time the patients live without tumour and without toxicity . . . how much of this is really good for them . . .”

Visit 6: “. . . the question we wanted to answer is um how much time do the patients have after the onset of therapy until . . . death or relapse without any symptoms at all . . .” (Lynch & Maclean, 2000, p. 236, p. 238)

On a practical level, there are several “activity frames” that lend themselves quite easily to recycling. The first is “Find Someone Who,” in which students work in a series of pairs to find out about each other. For example, seven or eight sentences like this are put on the board:

_____ likes to drive really fast.
_____ works at an interesting part-time job.

Students circulate and ask, for example, “Do you like to drive fast?” When a match is found, the partners move on. If the partner answers, “No,” the questioner moves on to the next question. This is an activity frame because it is a structure than can be used with many language structures, including all of the tenses and several functions.

Other examples of activity frames are Match Game and Memory Game. In Match Game, students answer eight to ten questions based on the target language. If working on likes and dislikes, for example, you might asks, “What food do you like?” After writing

their own answers, students work in groups of three and compare answers. Each pair that writes the same answer gets one point each. If all three partners write the same answer, everyone gets two points. The person in each group with the most points has the most universal answers; the person with the fewest points is the most original.

In the Memory Game, students, after doing a task, work in groups of three or four, close their books and see how many items they can remember from the task. they can be vocabulary items or example sentences. This can be either a cooperative task or a competition.

(For a archive of eleven activity frames, see
<http://www.mgu.ac.jp/~ic/helgesen/marc.article3.htm>)

Conclusion

Many have remarked on the uselessness of research to teacher's daily lives. I think they are wrong. I think in these three areas of planning, repetition, and recycling, we find research results that can guide practice, certainly not without adaptation, but in important ways. Conversely, I think classroom teachers are the ones who need to experiment with these ideas, talk about them with colleagues, and share them at conferences like this.

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